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ABSTRACT

As a college degree becomes increasingly important for individuals seeking employment, the numbers of first-generation students continues to grow. With the first-generation student pool comprised largely of members of working class families, ethnic minorities, women, and or adults, community colleges have always viewed first-generation students as a primary clientele. One of the greatest challenges confronted by first-generation students is that college attendance represents a departure from the pattern established by family and friends, who may in turn become non-supportive or obstructionist. This problem can be particularly difficult for traditional-age students who continue to live at home. First-generation students are often less well prepared for college than their classmates from college-educated families. In addition to being less prepared academically, such students often have insufficient knowledge of time-management techniques; the economic realities of college life; and the impersonal, bureaucratic nature of educational institutions. Among the strategies which colleges can employ to assist first-generation students are: (1) specialized outreach, tutoring, and mentoring programs; (2) bridge programs, linking high schools and post-secondary institutions to help students confront the obstacles to successful college preparation; and (3) college-orientation classes reviewing practical skills, college procedures, and available support services. For first-generation adult students, suggested instructional strategies include placing an emphasis on critical and analytical thinking skills, and offering interdisciplinary courses centered on specific themes. (PAA)

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FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

by Karin Petersen Hsiao

First-generation students -- students who are the first in their families to attend a postsecondary institution -- are an increasingly significant force in higher education. Although few American colleges or universities keep precise statistics on the number of first-generation students enrolled, there is general agreement that those numbers are growing as a college degree becomes a prerequisite for more and more jobs (London, 1992). These "new students" to higher education often face unique challenges in their quest for a degree; conflicting obligations, false expectations, and lack of preparation or support are among the factors that may hinder their success.

Community colleges have always considered first-generation students -- who tend to be from working class families, or to be ethnic minorities, women or adults -- a primary clientele (Padron, 1992). Indeed, a disproportionately large number of these students are concentrated in community colleges (London, 1992). This digest presents an overview of the obstacles that frequently stand between first-generation students and a postsecondary degree, and the ways in which community colleges are working to help them overcome those obstacles.

Straddling Two Cultures

One of the greatest challenges facing first-generation students in pursuit of a college education is their position on the margin of two cultures -- that of their friends and family and that of their college community (London, 1992). While going to college may be seen as a rite of passage for any student, it marks a significant separation from the past for those who are the first in their families to do so. Parents, siblings, and friends who have no experience of college or its rewards may be non-supportive or even obstructionist. This is particularly a problem for traditional-age students who still live at home -- they may not have or be able to create a designated place or time to study at home, and may be criticized for devoting time to school rather than family responsibilities (Padron, 1992). Particularly as they begin to take on the symbols of the college culture -- be it style of dress, taste in music, or range of vocabulary -- first-generation students often sense displeasure on the part of acquaintances, and feel an uncomfortable separation from the culture in which they grew up. Such tensions frequently require the student to "renegotiate relationships" with friends and relatives, something which is "not always done easily or with a happy ending" (London, 1992).

Even in the absence of resistance at home, first-generation students face numerous challenges in their attempt to move from the culture of home to the culture of higher education. In interviews with 107 minority students who had achieved baccalaureate degrees, Richardson and Skinner (1992) found that first-generation students who attended community colleges typically attended part-time and were more likely than their classmates to have significant work and family responsibilities. They fit school in around their other activities, spending relatively little time on campus. "For these students, being a college student was just one, and often not the most important, of many roles" (Richardson and Skinner, 1992). First-generation adult students, who typically receive more emotional support for their academic endeavors than do their younger classmates, are even more likely to have conflicting obligations (Zwerling, 1992).

Lack of Preparation

Added to the challenges of living on the margin of two cultures is the knowledge of many first-generation students that they are less well prepared for college life than are their classmates who come from college-educated families. In addition to inadequate academic backgrounds, students interviewed by Richardson and Skinner (1992) cited lack of experience with or knowledge of time-management, the economic realities of college life, and the impersonal, bureaucratic nature of institutions of higher education as obstacles to getting a degree. According to Dr. Castell Bryant, dean of students at Miami-Dade Community College's Wolfson Campus, a large percentage of first-generation students are intimidated by the educational system, and do not understand when it can be flexible and when it cannot (Padron, 1992). They "frequently described their first exposure to the campus as a shock that took them years to overcome" (Richardson and Skinner, 1992).

Strategies for Success

There are many ways in which institutions of higher education can assist first-generation students in their pursuit of a college degree. Strategies implemented to recruit and retain minority students -- specialized outreach, tutoring and mentoring programs, for example -- frequently work for first-generation students as well (Padron, 1992). The Wolfson campus of Miami-Dade Community College (M-DCC) aggressively recruits students who otherwise might not attend college, including first-generation minorities, through such efforts as the Black Student Recruitment Program and the InterAmerican Center's outreach program in Miami's Little Havana. M-DCC's Jump Start Program targets students who have high test scores and grade point averages, but who have expressed little interest in postsecondary education (Padron, 1992).

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Bridge programs, which create a link between students' high school and postsecondary education experiences, are an effective way to help first-generation students overcome a lack of college preparation. At LaGuardia Community College, a branch of The City University of New York, a Middle College exposes students to the college culture by bringing them to the campus for classes; small classes and attentive teachers provide a more college-like experience than the students typically get at local high schools. The International High School applies the same model to help prepare recent immigrants with limited English proficiency for college-level work (Chaffee, 1992). Similarly, Miami-Dade's Wolfson campus operates a Summer Institute, a free support services program which provides instruction in study skills and basic computer use (Padron, 1992).

The effort to help first-generation students succeed does not end once they are admitted to a college. Many of the successful first-generation students interviewed by Richardson and Skinner (1992) felt they "never could have made it" without the help of academic support programs and services provided by their institutions.

At Miami-Dade, one such program identifies high-risk students during the admissions process and requires them to take a college orientation course. The course teaches the students some of the practical skills required to succeed at college and familiarizes them with college procedures and available support services. In addition, all classes at the Wolfson campus participate in the Academic Alert system, which identifies students who are showing weak academic progress at mid-term. As part of the system, individualized letters are sent to the students, and counselors call them at home to encourage them to improve their academic standing (Padron, 1992). At LaGuardia, Critical Thinking and Speech Communication programs are specifically intended to help students develop skills necessary for academic and career success (Chaffee, 1992).

Successful minority students identified peer support as an important factor in their academic achievement; they noted, however, that such support groups were most likely to develop among students from college-educated families. In addition, first-generation minority students expressed a need to "scale down" the physical dimensions of the college experience, "to find places to study, meet friends, or seek support ... spaces that provided some measure of 'comfortability.'" Supportive academic department offices, advising services, programs or courses that allow for more personal interaction with faculty, or institutionally established, minority-focused networking groups can all serve to reduce the physical dimensions of the students' college experiences (Richardson and Skinner, 1992).

First-Generation Adults

First-generation adult students -- who are less likely to suffer from the culture shock of entering the college community, but who are more likely to be juggling conflicting responsibilities -- require somewhat different support mechanisms if they are to succeed in an academic setting. Zwerling (1992) argues, for instance, that teaching methods which are based on rote learning are not useful to adults who "enroll in large part for to search for meaning and redefinition." A pedagogy that emphasizes critical and analytical thinking is likely to be far more relevant to them. In addition, colleges should rethink the curriculum, organizing requirements into "coherent clusters of interdisciplinary courses that center around themes," and offering them in organized blocks of time so that adults can more easily fit their academic activities into an already busy schedule. (Zwerling, 1992).

Conclusion

First-generation students -- be they recent immigrants, members of ethnic minority or working-class families, or adults finally going back to school to get that degree they always wanted -- face a daunting array of challenges in their pursuit of a postsecondary education. In order for this high-risk group to succeed in their academic endeavors, colleges must provide a range of programs and services to counteract the weaknesses many of them bring to higher education and to help them overcome the obstacles they face once they enroll.

References

This digest was drawn from *First Generation Students: Confronting the Cultural Issues*, New Directions for Community Colleges, Number 80, edited by L. Steven Zwerling and Howard London; published in December 1992. The cited articles include: "Transforming Educational Dreams Into Educational Reality," by John Chaffee, Ph.D.; "Transformations: Cultural Challenges Faced by First Generation Students," by Howard B. London; "The Challenge of First-Generation Students: A Miami-Dade Perspective," by Eduardo J. Padron; "Helping First-Generation Minority Students Achieve Degrees," by Richard C. Richardson, Jr., and Elizabeth Fisk Skinner; and "First-Generation Adult Students: In Search of Safe Havens," by L. Steven Zwerling.

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